

Santiago Polanco-Abreu

1920–1988

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1965–1969
POPULAR DEMOCRAT FROM PUERTO RICO

Santiago Polanco-Abreu was one of the most powerful politicians in Puerto Rico during the 1960s. As committee chairman, speaker of the Puerto Rican house of representatives, and Resident Commissioner, Polanco-Abreu represented the next generation of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD). Known as “Chaguín,” Polanco-Abreu had a 20-year political career that paralleled the peak of the PPD’s influence mid-century and its fall in 1968. Committed to an expansive social agenda because of the poverty he experienced in childhood, Polanco-Abreu helped nurture Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status and worked to ensure that the island’s economic development was not disrupted by mainland policies. “I am not going to Washington hunting for a sinecure or material things,” he said after winning the election for Resident Commissioner. “I am going to Washington as a first-class Puerto Rican citizen to defend the rights of my people and to serve in the cause of democracy.”¹

Polanco-Abreu was born in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, on October 30, 1920, to Santiago Polanco González, a farmer and a veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I, and Anita Abreu.² As a child, Polanco-Abreu moved with his family to Barrio Bejucos in the town of Isabela along Puerto Rico’s north shore. The region was dominated by subsistence farms and checkered with fields of beans, cotton, and vegetables. Polanco-Abreu grew up without electricity, running water, or paved roads. He worked his family’s 20-acre plot and attended the local public schools, where he participated in drama productions and debates and served as class president. His parents, he said later, “knew perhaps by instinct that I should study.” What little money they earned was used for his education. “My father was getting [a] \$30 a month pension and he would give me the check the same day he received it, to go to the university,” said Polanco-Abreu.³ He attended the

University of Puerto Rico in San Juan, earning a bachelor’s degree in 1941 and a law degree two years later. In 1944 he married his college sweetheart, Viola Orsini. They adopted two children, José and Marta.⁴

Polanco-Abreu entered public service as soon as he finished school. He practiced law in Isabela and in San Juan, and from 1943 to 1944 he served as general counsel to the Tax Court of Puerto Rico. His first foray into electoral politics took place three years later. In 1947 Polanco-Abreu, then 28 years old and a firm supporter of PPD governor Luis Muñoz Marín, was elected to the Puerto Rican house of representatives to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Esteban Susoni Lens. In the insular house, he sat on the rules and calendar committee and eventually became vice chairman of the committees on interior government, appointments, and impeachment proceedings.⁵ Before long, the ruling party took note of his “clean-cut, self-possessed, amiable” personality and appointed him to the island’s commonwealth convention in 1951.⁶ Polanco-Abreu’s political identity was consonant with his personal experiences. He referred to himself as a *jíbaro*, a salt-of-the-earth commoner, and readily identified with Puerto Rico’s poor, once proudly telling reporters that his upbringing helped him “understand life.”⁷ But he was also comfortable in other strata of society and earned a reputation as “the only [member] who . . . exhibits definite ability to handle people at all levels—and who keeps in contact with that vast body of voters referred to as the masses.”⁸

Eager to influence fiscal policy, Polanco-Abreu was quickly appointed chairman of the financial services committee. One of the most powerful groups in the legislature, the committee was responsible for the commonwealth’s entire budget. It was said that he did 75 percent of the committee’s work himself, rarely relinquishing control and refusing to create permanent



subcommittees to manage the legislative workload. Polanco-Abreu oversaw huge increases in government spending, causing many to observe that he might be overly loyal to the Muñoz Marín administration.⁹ “Polanco has been so close to Muñoz since he was a fledgling in the Legislature that it is difficult to distinguish the branch from the tree,” went one assessment.¹⁰

Five days before the Puerto Rican house reconvened in January 1963, speaker Ernesto Ramos Antonini died of a heart attack, creating a power vacuum at the helm of the PPD.¹¹ As chairman of the financial services committee, Polanco-Abreu was quickly tapped by party leadership for inclusion on the short list of replacements. At 42, he was nearly a generation younger than the other candidates, including house vice president Jorge Font Saldaña, whom many viewed as the logical successor, but Polanco-Abreu’s “dynamic drive and quick intelligence” won him respect as a dark horse candidate.¹²

In a vote predetermined at party headquarters earlier that day, Polanco-Abreu was formally elected speaker of the Puerto Rican house of representatives on January 17, 1963. His youth, his humble beginnings, and his party loyalty made him the overwhelming choice to lead the next generation of PPD brass.¹³ The *San Juan Star Sunday Magazine* wrote, “For a politician, Polanco casts an immaculate image which inspires trust. One would never think of Polanco Abreu as foxy, cunning, or cagey. He appears like an open book.”¹⁴ Amid speculation that Muñoz Marín had influenced the vote, administration officials denied any involvement. “Polanco made it on his own,” they said.¹⁵ From the start, the young speaker maintained the furious energy that had fueled his climb to the top. After a breakfast of black coffee—“the staple of his diet,” observed one journalist—Polanco-Abreu arrived at the capitol just before eight o’clock in the morning, worked 12 to 14 hours a day five days a week, and met with constituents on Saturdays. He was well liked by his house colleagues and often settled policy disputes over dinner at his home on McLeary Street.¹⁶ Polanco-Abreu himself presided over nearly every legislative day. His duties as speaker forced him to abandon his law practice in San Juan, but he kept his

Isabela district office open. “I want to dedicate all my time to public service,” he said in spring 1963.¹⁷

As speaker, Polanco-Abreu never strayed far from the PPD’s agenda, keeping the Puerto Rican house on a short tether. Along with Puerto Rico’s secretary of state and the senate’s majority leader, Polanco-Abreu made up the island’s political “triumvirate,” the governor’s unofficial brain trust.¹⁸ He oversaw the commonwealth’s budget, continued to advocate for rural and underserved communities, supported Puerto Rico’s involvement in Caribbean affairs, and championed the island’s commonwealth status and cultural identity. “When a people is associated permanently with another country like the United States which is an economic giant, there are grave and serious risks that assimilation can occur,” he said shortly after taking office, “but I have fought and will continue to fight so that the people of Puerto Rico conserve all their spiritual wealth and all their personality as a people.”¹⁹ Despite his efforts, Polanco-Abreu faced severe difficulties and was forced to admit, “The work facing Puerto Rico is not the task of men but of generations.”²⁰

The next generation of PPD leaders was pushed to take action sooner than Polanco-Abreu anticipated. On August 16, 1964, the speaker learned at the party’s nominating convention that Governor Muñoz Marín would not run for re-election. Even more important, Polanco-Abreu had been handpicked to succeed the retiring Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House, Antonio Fernós-Isern.²¹ Shocked and somewhat dismayed, he accepted the nomination.²² Ever loyal, Polanco-Abreu insisted it was his “moral obligation to accept the mandate of the central committee of the party.”²³

There was little doubt about the outcome of the 1964 race. As speaker, Polanco-Abreu had wide name recognition, and as a party lieutenant he was able to marshal important campaign resources. He stumped primarily in Spanish and was frequently criticized for being deficient in English.²⁴ The party platform pushed for permanent commonwealth status, judicial and electoral reform, the decentralization of municipal planning boards, more funding for vocational training, and the expansion of the island’s police force.²⁵ After directing orientations for local party leaders and giving

a radio address on the eve of the election, Polanco-Abreu achieved a “crushing” victory, capturing 59 percent of the ballot and beating statehood Republican candidate Manuel Iglesias by nearly 205,000 votes.²⁶

Polanco-Abreu made friends quickly in the U.S. House and throughout Washington, D.C., but as Resident Commissioner he lacked legislative power and voting privileges. The island press described his position as “little more than that of a ‘cost-plus’ lobbyist with the right to hang his hat in the House Office Building.”²⁷ Just two months into his first session, Polanco-Abreu said, “It would be worth-while ... to review the concept of the Resident Commissioner.”²⁸ His frustration at being unable to vote on the floor continued to plague him throughout his House tenure. He sat on committees with jurisdictions relevant to Puerto Rico’s major legislative concerns—Agriculture, Armed Services, and Interior and Insular Affairs—and although he supported President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society programs, Polanco-Abreu was limited to a supporting role because of his inability to vote.

Over the course of his House career, Polanco-Abreu focused on constituent services, introducing dozens of private relief bills, advocating for the extension of federal services, and seeking to fit Puerto Rico’s interests into the President’s social programs. When Congress moved to curtail subsidies for American rice exports in 1965, Polanco-Abreu testified about the devastating effects this policy would have on the island. Higher food prices “would be a step in retreat in today’s war on poverty being waged by the administration and the Congress,” he said.²⁹ The commonwealth’s relaxed labor laws were key to its economic development, and Polanco-Abreu opposed amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act that would raise the national minimum wage by 50 cents. Many felt this increase would be detrimental to current business and discourage potential industry.³⁰ The problem, Polanco-Abreu said on the House Floor, was that the island was being judged by mainland standards. “The economic intrinsics of Puerto Rico are so different from those of the United States as to be almost unfathomable,” he said in May 1966.³¹

Polanco-Abreu compensated for his lack of voting privileges by testifying frequently before House and Senate committees. Because Polanco-Abreu knew the value of education, one of his main goals was to improve the island’s school system. He helped procure millions in funding for local schools, predicting that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 would affect Puerto Rico more dramatically than any previous education bill.³² During a hearing on a 1966 education bill, he observed that education could help lower crime. “Our war against crime must be waged not with clubs and guns, but with books and tools,” he said.³³ Later, when Congress considered reforming the Social Security system during the 90th Congress (1967–1969), Polanco-Abreu implored his colleagues to remember that Puerto Rico’s residents were U.S. citizens and required the same protections as those on the mainland.

Polanco-Abreu never had the opportunity to tackle Puerto Rico’s status question. On July 23, 1967, the people of Puerto Rico voted to remain a U.S. commonwealth, delaying any congressional debate about the island’s independence or statehood. When the Resident Commissioner announced the results of the plebiscite on the House Floor the next day, Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma and Majority Whip Hale Boggs of Louisiana offered their congratulations. “I must pay tribute to the distinguished Resident Commissioner and his diligence in representing the interests of Puerto Rico here upon the floor and before the congressional committees,” Boggs said. The peaceful vote, he added, was “something that all of us as Americans can be very proud of.”³⁴

Despite the pro-commonwealth vote and seemingly strong support for the PPD, the island’s Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP) had grown more powerful during Polanco-Abreu’s four years in Washington. By 1968 infighting had undercut the PPD’s effectiveness, forcing Polanco-Abreu onto the short list of gubernatorial candidates. Given the rank and file’s distrust of party leadership, Polanco-Abreu touted “his candidacy as the only way of reconciling” the PPD. “I represent the unity of the party,” he said, emphasizing the theme of his campaign.³⁵ While the

other candidates indulged in personal attacks, Polanco-Abreu prided himself on running a clean, issues-oriented campaign and advocated for many of his congressional interests, including education, rehabilitation for drug users, and economic growth.³⁶ In early July he likened his campaign to “a rising river that is opening paths and filling ditches.”³⁷ But running for governor while serving as Resident Commissioner was taxing; Polanco-Abreu spent four days a week in Puerto Rico and the remainder of the week in Washington, often giving interviews in the airport.³⁸ During the closed primary in late July, Polanco-Abreu failed to win the nomination, placing second to the senate’s majority leader.³⁹ Instead he was nominated for re-election as Resident Commissioner, a race that many, including Polanco-Abreu, assumed he would win.⁴⁰ But after a contentious campaign in which his opponent Jorge Luis Córdova-Díaz of the PNP criticized him for missing subcommittee meetings and ignoring the island’s booming middle class, Polanco-Abreu lost by roughly 15,000 votes, or only 1.7 percent.⁴¹

After his loss, Polanco-Abreu retired from politics and returned to his law practice in Isabela. He died 20 years later, on the morning of January 18, 1988. The island was plunged into mourning, and Polanco-Abreu’s dedicated service to Puerto Rico was commemorated by friends and political foes alike. “He was a magnificent speaker and his record as resident commissioner was brilliant,” reflected his former running mate, Luis Negrón Lopez. “Puerto Rico has lost a good man,” said former governor Roberto Sanchez Vilella.⁴² But Polanco-Abreu himself said it best: “I have served the Popular Democratic Party,” he had noted after leaving politics in 1968. “I served the cause to which I have devoted my life.”⁴³

FOR FURTHER READING

Acevedo, Héctor Luis, ed., *Santiago Polanco Abreu: Compromiso y verticalidad en su lucha por Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, 2010).

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Santiago Polanco-Abreu,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

NOTES

- 1 “Yo no voy a Washington a caza de prebendas ni de bienes materiales. Voy a Washington como ciudadano de primera clase, a defender los derechos de mi pueblo y a servir a la causa de la democracia.” Luis E. Agrait Betancourt, “La educación política de un Comisionado Residente,” in Hector Luis Acevedo, ed., *Santiago Polanco Abreu: Compromiso y verticalidad en su lucha por Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, 2010): 383–384. Translated as “The Political Education of a Resident Commissioner,” by Translations International, Inc. (October 2011).
- 2 “Y Anita, la mamá de Chaguín.... El padre de Santiago Polanco Abreu, don Santiago Polanco González.” José Enrique Ayoroa Santaliz, “El entorno familiar y emocional del joven Chaguín Polanco,” in Acevedo, ed., *Santiago Polanco Abreu: Compromiso y verticalidad en su lucha por Puerto Rico*: 91, 93. Translated as “The Family and Emotional Background of Young Chaguín Polanco,” by Translations International, Inc. (October 2011). See also Juan Manuel Ocasio, “The Man Called Polanco,” 2 February 1964, *San Juan Star Sunday Magazine*: 8.
- 3 Alan Lupo, “A Jibaro in the Halls of Congress,” 25 February 1965, *Baltimore Sun*: 18.
- 4 Manny Suarez, “Polanco Abreu Apparently Kills Self,” 19 January 1988, *San Juan Star*: 1. “Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, Polanco Abreu inició dos etapas de importancia personal, obtuvo el grado de Licenciado en Derecho en 1943 y casó el año siguiente con Viola Orsini.” Ruben Arrieta, “Un doloroso aniversario,” 19 January 1988, *El nuevo día*: 7. Translated as “A Painful Anniversary,” by Translations International, Inc. (October 2011).
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- 6 Ocasio, “The Man Called Polanco.”
- 7 Lupo, “A Jibaro in the Halls of Congress.”
- 8 Ocasio, “The Man Called Polanco.”
- 9 A. W. Maldonado, “Record P.R. Budget Goes to Legislature,” 15 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 1; “Polanco—Prospects Bright,” 18 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 15.
- 10 Ocasio, “The Man Called Polanco.”
- 11 Eddie Lopez, “Ramos Antonini, 64, Dies Suddenly,” 10 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 12 Eddie Lopez, “Key Topic at Capitol: Who’ll Succeed Ramos?” 11 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 1; A. W. Maldonado, “The New Leader,” 13 March 1963, *San Juan Star*: 13.
- 13 A. W. Maldonado, “Polanco Abreu Voted New House Speaker,” 18 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 14 Ocasio, “The Man Called Polanco.”

- 15 A. W. Maldonado, "Munoz Did Not Take Sides in Speaker Election," 19 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 4.
- 16 Margot Preece, "Polanco Abreu Has Firm Grip on House," 2 February 1963, *San Juan Star*: 7; Nory Segarra, "Speaker's Wife Trained in Politics But Her Main Job Is Their Home," 28 January 1963, *San Juan Star*: 10.
- 17 "Polanco Clarifies Remarks about Practice of Law," 4 April 1963, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 18 Ocasio, "The Man Called Polanco."
- 19 Preece, "Polanco Abreu Has Firm Grip on House."
- 20 Normal Gall, "'Social Redemption' Confronts Puerto Rico—Polanco Abreu," 6 February 1963, *San Juan Star*: 3; Margot Preece, "House Sends Record Budget to Senate," 22 May 1963, *San Juan Star*: 3; "A Bigger Budget," 22 May 1963, *San Juan Star*: 15; Margot Preece, "Legislature Convened; Vote Law Change Due," 14 January 1964, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 21 Margot Preece, "House Speaker Gives Details of Nominating Convention," 15 August 1964, *San Juan Star*: 1.
- 22 A. W. Maldonado, "What Really Happened: Inside the Popular Convention," 30 August 1964, *San Juan Star Magazine*: 3.
- 23 "Polanco Abreu: 'I'm Not Upset,'" 26 August 1964, *San Juan Star*: 3.
- 24 Walter S. Priest, "What Lies Ahead for Polanco?" 15 November 1964, *San Juan Star Sunday Magazine*: 3; "P.D.P. to Orientate District Chiefs," 25 August 1964, *San Juan Star*: 6.
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- 28 Lupo, "A Jibaro in the Halls of Congress."
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- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 2nd sess. (16 May 1966): 10584–10585; *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 May 1966): 10850.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 2nd sess. (24 May 1966): 11274–11275.
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- 38 James McDonough, "Polanco's Campaign," 10 July 1968, *San Juan Star*: 21; James McDonough, "Polanco Kisses Off Sanchez' Chances," 11 July 1968, *San Juan Star*: 3.
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- 41 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 42 Quotes from Jaime Pieras, "Political Leaders Shocked by Death of Polanco Abreu," 19 January 1988, *San Juan Star*: 14; Suarez, "Polanco Abreu Apparently Kills Self."
- 43 McDonough, "Polanco: I'll Gain at Convention." In the days following his death, the press reported that Polanco-Abreu was believed to have taken his own life.